

The Grimsby Project We need to talk about work

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'In lockdown people really pulled together – people can say what they like about Grimsby – but if you've only skimmed the surface and seen the bad, you've not looked properly for all the good.'

Retail Worker



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We need to talk about work

Something is missing from our conversations about the future of work: stories from people who are experiencing transformation directly. While ambitions about the future of work in Grimsby are plentiful, we rarely hear from the people who live there. The Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW) seeks to redress this imbalance, through research and design-thinking methods centred around the everyday experience of working people.

It is widely acknowledged across social sciences and economics¹ that stories shape economic and political realities now and in the future. Stories craft decisions and behaviours, shaping rules and resources – and in turn, opportunities. It matters then, who tells stories about the future of work, and whether these stories can shape a world in which communities flourish.

From October 2020, we have spoken to Grimsby residents in a diverse set of roles. This report shares their voices and stories. We have complemented this research with our own analysis, to curate a story of own making. This story, in this report, has been reviewed by residents and illustrated by a local, Grimsby artist.

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Acknowledgements

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Key findings:

- The strength of social relationships and communities in Grimsby has shone through the pandemic. Strong communities are of high importance to local residents. Strong communities are closely associated with creating good, local work.
- The ‘problem’ in Grimsby is often diagnosed as a lack of aspiration. However, residents we spoke to have aspiration for good, local work. They lack clear support and pathways to achieve these aspirations.
- There are currently no real spaces, institutions or methods to enable the people of Grimsby to talk about their future of work, as individuals looking to change their lives, or as communities. This hampers meaningful involvement in the design of work futures.
- While glamorous futures of work are projected onto Grimsby, residents feel disconnected from these stories and would like to shape their own collective story about the future of local, good work.

Investor



Section 1

Why Grimsby?

Grimsby, located in North East Lincolnshire, ranks 107th of 118 localities for the provision of good work in IFOW's Good Work Monitor. It has long been the target of Whitehall ambitions for regeneration, and proposals for more local control over growth.²



The labour market is characterised by entrenched and structural labour market problems, with a high share of routine occupations, associated with a higher risk of automation and labour market polarisation.³ The pressing need for nuanced, locally-targeted policies in such localities is quite literally a matter of life and death, as North East Lincolnshire has the highest levels of 'Diseases of Despair' such as depression and alcoholism in the region. IFOW's Good Work Monitor found that 'Diseases of Despair' were linked to local economic conditions.

COVID-19 has been a source of disruption to all communities, however, it has hit some harder than others. Analysis early in the pandemic suggested that the close contact nature of work in Grimsby placed the community at higher risk.⁴ The disruption to work in Grimsby caused by the pandemic has come alongside a slower moving shock of technological transition.⁵ COVID-19, by changing the incentive structures for businesses to automate processes, has accelerated this technological transition.⁶

Why Grimsby?

‘Great’ Grimsby was the home port to the world’s largest fishing fleet in the mid twentieth century. However, following decline through the Cod Wars, and wider deindustrialisation, Grimsby suffered economic shrinkage,⁷ with knock on impacts for the community.

This industrial decline threatens to persist, as Grimsby has an unusually high share of jobs at risk of automation.⁸ The area has seen growth in largely low-paid, precarious food processing employment since the 1990s. While this has offered a labour-intensive solution to unemployment, it does not offer a ‘good work’ solution for residents.



‘We’re in a period of massive change, whether we like it or not, change is here, change is happening... the lockdown has changed the way we see our lives and we’ve all had this kind of existential moment when we’ve thought... what our lives are for? We’ve only got a limited time left, what are we going to do with it? Who are we going to care for?’

NGO Employee

Grimsby is characterised by both poor provision of good work, and poor conditions for good work.⁹ This can exacerbate inequality, and work against strong communities – feeding resentment about who gains access to work, particularly good work. This can also break up communities, as young people feel they have to leave to find opportunities which suit them.



‘There’s always been an element of big industry jobs set against harder, lower paid, more sporadic work, in a tighter knit community.’

Renewables Worker



‘Processing is a labour-intensive industry, while most people are working zero hours contracts in food processing plants, it’s still work. The level to which these businesses are automated varies greatly – there’s a pivot point with the price of local labour, against cost of investment in infrastructure.’

Investor

Why Grimsby?

Labour intensive work in food processing has provided a solution to the question of quantity of employment in recent years in Grimsby. Unlike high productivity, high tech sectors it still relies on human workers. However, this work is not characterised by good conditions. A young person we spoke to described the degrading conditions his mother experienced working in a fish processing factory. While local organisations have sought to change this, without the right supporting regulation they have struggled.

In Grimsby, some people work in sectors the government has written out of their stories for the future. In early 2020, before the pandemic began, the Government proposed that rather than relying on cheap labour, these industries should turn to automation to become efficient and maintain a competitive edge.¹⁰ In this sense, the government – a key storyteller about the future of work nationally, and in Grimsby, deigned a significant supply of work, albeit bad work, to be the work of yesterday rather than tomorrow. This contributes a new dimension to our understanding of belonging to the work of the future, versus being excluded from it and belonging to the work of the past.



'They send people home at 4am when they've asked them to come in, when they know they've only got 6 jobs and they ask 12... We just stopped trying to work with [to improve working conditions] the food manufacturers because there was never anything about the triple bottom line. There was never anything about business for social purpose.'

NGO Director

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Civil Servant



Section 2

A changing tide?

Grimsby's Future of Work is undergoing a reinvention. In recent months there have been bold, ambitious and even glamorous futures projected for, and onto Grimsby.

It is set to be the location of one of the Government's new high tech freeports,¹¹ which it is claimed will revitalise maritime identity, bring thousands of new jobs, and increase the wealth of residents.¹²



'There's some really positive things happening in Grimsby. I think the announcement of the Freeport is really good news. I think decarbonisation is really good news.'

Civil Servant



'I want to be optimistic that the future of work in Grimsby will improve. The Great Grimsby Town Deal, the Freeport status, the renewable sector especially, would point towards that.'

NGO Director

In the national press, Grimsby was recently acclaimed to be the 'model' for other towns post-pandemic for its 'green growth' potential – now home to the world's largest offshore wind farm with associated high-tech, highly skilled jobs.¹³



'Living here all my life, the port has always been a massive thing for Grimsby. Grimsby is your hometown and you want to see it do well. To see money come back into the town is good. I'd like to work for a company that wants to improve where I live.'

Port Engineer

A changing tide?

When stories about new futures of work are endorsed and created by the Government they are supported and underpinned by resources. The freeport is underpinned by the waiving of business rates, a local tax, and employer exemptions from national insurance contributions.¹⁴ The offshore wind sector has seen a number of government incentives and support over the years, most recently being bolstered by a £160 million fund to support the next generation of offshore wind turbine being manufactured, as the capacity target for 2030 was raised 33 per cent. In turn, stories told by government shape, make and create futures of work.



'Ørsted Wind Turbines – it's big things that are moving for the Town, and when you see that in your town, it makes you proud.'*

Retail Worker

* Ørsted develops, constructs, and operates offshore and onshore wind farms, solar farms, energy storage facilities, and bioenergy plants. Headquartered in Denmark it has operational wind farms off the Yorkshire coast with others under construction and in development.

Port Engineer



Section 3

Building back better?

While offshore wind is a key story about the future of work in Grimsby told by national actors, members of the community we spoke with weren't as confident that this offered a solution to Grimsby's challenges.

As a high productivity sector, limited human labour is required. In turn, jobs in the wind sector are limited and oversubscribed, with the college receiving ten applications for each apprenticeship. Beyond the sector not offering a 'mass' employment solution, jobs which are available have a high threshold to entry, requiring higher level qualifications.



'The offshore industries feel very remote to us and they don't seem like they're going to... You know, there's always the golden possibility that they're going to be, come and save us and whatever. But we're not feeling that at all, quite honestly.'

NGO Employee

While these jobs are well rewarded financially, we heard employees often chose to live in wealthier areas outside of Grimsby Town, and commute back to mainland Europe. This international skills import is also mirrored by the import of the manufactured parts, owing to our relatively recent commitment to the green wind agenda relative to international partners.



'We'll have a few people who will be very engaged and doing very well and excited about doing a new industry that's hitting the news but how wide will that impact reach?'

Renewables Worker

Building back better?

In summary, stories about Grimsby are characterised by jobs of ‘yesterday’ and jobs of tomorrow. Low pay work in labour intensive processing offers an employment solution but does not offer good work and the government have suggested much of this should be automated. In contrast, the jobs of tomorrow in high productivity green jobs offer good work, but residents do not know how to access this and are sceptical it will be sufficient to drive the change they want to see.



‘In terms of when we’re looking at trying to make change happen on a local level, it’s really hard to bring Green into it. It’s really hard to do without the overall structure helping us do that.’

NGO Director



‘We’ve had to go with global supply chains to the detriment of fulfilling UK supply chains where you would see job growth. The companies are German, Norwegian Danish... 15 years ago if the UK had committed itself to building its own renewables industry and made that strategic industrial decision [it would have been different].’

Renewables worker

This aligns with our previous work, that automation risk can shape political behaviours.¹⁵ Drawing from ‘insider-outsider’ theory, we propose thinking about the impacts of automation on workers in terms of a spectrum from labour market ‘inclusion’ to labour market ‘exclusion’. People’s experience in the labour market ranges from having secure and good quality work (‘included’) to being long term unemployed (‘excluded’), with various stages in between. A growing share of people feel unable to find the hook to get out of bad work and are excluded from the jobs of the future.



‘Green seems a really narrow conversation to me because whilst there are potentially jobs for the future, there aren’t a lot of jobs now. You won’t get Green in the top 20 at the moment. So it just feels a bit narrow to me to focus on Green, I don’t think the Green industry is going to be the saviour of our community.’

Civil Servant

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College Student



Section 4

Ladders to success

Raising the aspirations of residents in Grimsby was a core issue for many of the stakeholders we spoke to. For those who don't succeed in securing the limited opportunities for good work, this suggests the predominant issue is mindset.



'If they aspire to be educated they have to leave... and societally there's not that ambition for young people, because if people go away they may not come back.'

Youth Worker

However, the young people we spoke to were more sceptical about the extent to which their own drive determined their outcomes. The poor availability of good work, with no clear infrastructure or means to control or change this, led people to feel helpless. In the context of having too few 'good' jobs in Grimsby, young people we spoke to expressed fear about missing out on these 'top' opportunities. Adults we spoke to suggested young people come to expect the minimum viable option from employment – or 'less than they should expect'.



'There's so much negative publicity with us being the second most deprived town, Grimsby the film, worst place for this and that – all of this – so you have two types of people growing up, some that succumb to that narrative and the others that want to stand against it.'

Small Business Owner



'I think sometimes the family you're born into, if you haven't got that you're not aware of jobs and prospects or going to university. So those kinds of higher paid, skilled jobs, young people in those situations don't have those aspirations.'

Secondary School Pupil

Ladders to success

However, the infrastructure – or ladders – to support people to transition into different opportunities throughout their lives, and shape the overarching availability of good work locally, are absent. People we spoke with felt ‘trapped’ in careers which weren’t fulfilling as they didn’t know how to get out of them. Young people also had a sense of this – and feared making poor choices which could determine their whole life at the age of 14, before they had ever had a taste of work. This is exacerbated by poor funding for careers advice, and a paucity of work experience. The need for better, more expansive work experience was a key priority for young people we spoke to.



‘You pick your GCSE’s before you’ve ever had the chance to see what a job looks like, and then if you make the wrong choices it feels like you’ll get stuck in it for life.’

Secondary School Pupil



‘We need clarity about what careers might look like for them. And career teams don’t exist as much because they’re not being funded.’

Civil Servant

In summary, there is a lack of infrastructure for people of all ages to find support to transition into good work, where it is available.



‘I found that this area, for people like myself who had an aspiration of earning above the national minimum wage, at that particular time it was very limited... our majority of entry level employment is the low skilled sector. And a lot of people that I’ve tried to support previously struggled to advance from that.’

NGO Director



‘There isn’t a lot of jobs or opportunities unless you’re a high achiever... and so children think well there’s no jobs for me, and they’re all talking about it – oh I’d love to do this but there’s nothing there... there needs to be a push that there could be a brighter future.’

Retail Worker



‘If you asked a kid now, here, “What are you going to do when you...?” “I don’t know.” And they’re right, because there’s no pathway. There’s no structure, you know?’

NGO Employee



Youth Worker

Section 5

Reframing aspiration: Good work, strong communities

While several stakeholders noted that there needed to be more high-pay high-status work in the town, this was not what young people described when asked to talk about what made work good work.



'There isn't anyone to talk to other than the Job Centre, and that's if you're unemployed and then they just want to get you back into any work.'

NGO Director



'Young people have aspirations, they just don't expect to be able to fulfil them here.'

Council Employee



'There's no global accountancy firm in the town, no EY or any of the big players in cities like Leeds. So how do people get an idea of doing something as big as that?'

Investor

Instead, good work was work that promoted wellbeing and served the greater purpose of strong communities.



'Satisfying work is when you know you've done a good job. That you've completed everything that you needed to complete. You've helped people, and you're not going home stressed at the end of the day.'

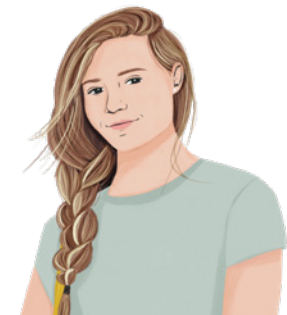
Secondary School Pupil



'I want my job to have an impact. I've had lots of rubbish jobs – stacking shelves, working in shops – but now I do something that I feel has a purpose, and I have an impact, not wasting my time.'

Youth Worker

Reframing aspiration: Good work, strong communities



'I'm quite interested in working with the environment and nature. Sort of like a conservation route. Because I think that's quite important... and I just want to like work outside.'

College Student



'If you actually want to do the job, then you're more likely to enjoy yourself and do better in a way, compared to if you didn't like it.'

Secondary School Pupil



'What I found out through trying to find volunteering, it's hard to get work in those sectors, I'd love to be part of the youth zone and the wellbeing suite and support young people, where you can really take that time for someone who is out of their depth.'

Retail Worker

Yet, people do not always have the means to marry work with what they have reason to value. Similarly, work which people had most enjoyed and valued was not always financially rewarded. Several interviewees mentioned the challenge of securing well paid work which also helped them to build a strong community.



'I see gardening as a beautifying exercise, and there's a connection with customers when you've done a garden well, because of the way I've cut the lawn or the trees in the right way, so you get a satisfaction through that indirect care for the garden, which is theirs, it's you know, consideration. But I can't get paid to do that now.'

Small Business Owner



'Sometimes your bills and priorities have to come before what kind of job you actually want, and what kind of job you need, what's available.'

Youth Worker

Reframing aspiration: Good work, strong communities

Technology does not always serve these ends and can work against these outcomes. It can in fact have the inverse effect, both in desk based work and frontline roles.



'The supermarket app set out all of my hours for me before I'd even said what times I was available as well as finishing at 10pm at night and starting at 6am – it used to kill me. It's hard... They just don't have the idea that you're a human being.'

Retail Worker



'Workers in care roles are picked up and dropped, used for very little time. It should be part of what we are doing, as part of levelling up – getting local employers to raise their game.'

Council Employee



'I was just going to say technology doesn't help. Because you're there all the time, aren't you? Everybody's got work laptops, work phones and everything now, and it just makes it a lot easier for people to make contact with you.'

NGO Director

For more information on the effect of technology on work see the IFOW reports 'The Amazonian Era: How algorithmic systems are eroding good work' and 'Mind the Gap: The Final Report of the Equality Task Force'.

Youth Worker



Section 6

Work which works for communities

Grimsby, like many communities, needs better infrastructure for dialogue and conversation about the future of work, as existing conversations don't include residents.



'We're all in the same boat. We want to make this area better, and the community stronger. We recognise that jobs are going to contribute towards that, so how can we pull together to make that happen?'

'My experience over the past three years through Empowering Places¹⁶ has been a positive one in terms of the ability to design community businesses and different models of business that can be more positive. And in doing that and being part of that, I believe that we've got some agency and some ability to make those changes and make those changes work.'

NGO Director

Where residents came together to talk about what communities need, they were also able to build new opportunities for good work. Where people we spoke to could reconcile building stronger communities with good work, this brought happiness.

We found initiatives taking place in Grimsby to promote good work and a more inclusive discussion around what work the community values and needs.



'You talk about the future of work. I mean people don't feel, I don't think they have agency in affecting the outcomes of a discussion like that. This conversation is very interesting. And it's not a conversation I've had before. The Town Deal feels very remote to us.'

NGO Employee

Work which works for communities

Without these conversations, work may follow trajectories set by stories that do not result in more good work. As one local business owner told us, his main inspiration for improving working conditions was Amazon.

As our own work has demonstrated, such models for work require careful reflection.¹⁷

The Ethical Recruitment Agency (ERA)

Centre4 started a conversation about work in Grimsby, which led to huge change in the community.

‘We started from listening to quite a number of people in focus groups about their employment issues and heard they were commonly experiencing massive issues with agencies and how they were treated and people – they told us they’d rather not work than go through an agency. And [we] took that as well hang on that can’t be right, there’s got to be a better way if people feel like that...’

Centre4 set up an Ethical Recruitment Agency which seeks to get people into good quality work. The ERA seeks to improve the playing field in terms of agency work. Through COVID-19, the ERA worked with the local authority to recruit COVID-19 support assistants, track and trace, people to work with the crematorium, people to work in refuse, changing the career prospects and lives of those on their books. This demonstrated a new model of local authority contracting, to the benefit of the local community.

East Marsh Construction

East Marsh construction employs local residents to build affordable housing for local communities. East Marsh Construction was formed following conversations within local charity, East Marsh United, about what the community needs.

‘We think work that needs to be done is, well, it’s turning houses back into something that’s an asset to the community... So we’re working with the council, the Empty Homes Fund, to actually buy up some of these empty homes... And we’re doing it up with East Marsh Construction, which started through East Marsh United – they’re off on their own now and they’re doing really well and they’ve employed nine people mostly local lads... So we’re slowly trying to grow all this, but that’s just us – the rest of it just feels so remote. I mean the reason why when we talked about UK, it’s like well, you know, duh! We just focus here, we’re just trying to do our bit and if we can stop that wealth extraction happening, and if we can build, facilitate groups to build their own projects, empower them to believe that they can build their own projects...’



Secondary School Pupil

Conclusions

On the surface the future of work seems bright for Grimsby, with investments in green jobs touted to revitalise a flagging local economy. There is also great optimism about the future among residents, however this is not necessarily wedded to these visions.

Grimsby is often described as having an aspiration problem. However, the people we spoke to had aspirations; but at present, no mechanisms to achieve them. Both the ladders to success and spaces to shape stronger communities, through better work are missing.

If we are to create a better, more inclusive future of work for Grimsby we need to ensure ladders to success are built in, and that the real desires of communities, to make good work, work for them, are heard.

In response, we recommend that:

1

‘Work Hubs’ are established in areas characterised by poor availability of good work. These should provide a proactive, go to space for people who want to a) discuss how to build good work which works for communities and b) find practical support on transitions, to access ladders to success throughout their life. These centres should:

- Provide support to those who want to undertake career transitions, working with and promoting adult education and work placement opportunities with skills providers and local businesses.
- Disseminate information about how the government shapes futures of work. This is a precursor to residents effectively engaging in opportunities to shape their collective work futures.
- Provide space for community led dialogue about how to build futures of work which work for communities.
- Ensure a strong level of youth participation in conversations about the future of work.



Conclusions

2

Government should establish a clear set of parameters for worker-citizen engagement in the Levelling Up strategy which should aim to build new forms of civic and social infrastructure to improve work. Designed in collaboration with local authorities and devolved administrations, the strategy should identify mechanisms, timelines, and funding strategies to ensure local residents can meaningfully contribute to future policy and governance decisions which shape their futures of work.

3

National and Local Work 5.0 strategies should bridge the disconnect between plans projected onto communities and their priorities, developing the conditions and pathways to Good Work across all sectors.

We look forward to continuing our work in Grimsby, working with local residents to help facilitate the vision outlined in this report.



Endnotes

- 1 Shiller, Robert J. Narrative economics: How stories go viral and drive major economic events. Princeton University Press, 2020.
- 2 Grimsby was one of the first locations to receive a 'Towns Deal', see more at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-announces-landmark-town-deal-for-greater-grimsby>
- 3 Chris Pissarides, Jolene Skordis, Anna Thomas, Samuel Atwell, Josh De Lyons. 'Automation, Politics and the Future of Work' IFOW 2019.
- 4 British Red Cross Vulnerability Index, as cited by Will Thompson of the Social Investment Business: <https://www.sibgroup.org.uk/blog/covid-19-grimsby-deep-dive>
- 5 The Impact of Automation on Labour Markets: Interactions with Covid-19 IFOW (2020). <https://www.ifow.org/publications/the-impact-of-automation-on-labour-markets-interactions-with-covid-19>
- 6 Ibid
- 7 <https://www.grimsbytelegraph.co.uk/news/grimsby-news/grimsby-voted-worst-place-live-70623>; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3bjkk3/in-defence-of-grimsby-the-worst-place-in-the-uk-to-be-a-man-193>; <https://www.grimsbytelegraph.co.uk/news/grimsby-news/grimsby-ranked-unhealthiest-high-street-2175412>
- 8 ONS automation statistics.
- 9 <https://www.ifow.org/publications/the-good-work-monitor>
- 10 Micheal Gove, speaking at the Oxford Farming Conference on Thursday 5th of January. <https://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Article/2018/01/06/Food-manufacturers-should-not-rely-on-low-cost-migrant-labour>
- 11 Laister, David and Waller Jamie 'Freeport Status to Bring Thousands of Jobs to Region' 21st March 2021. <https://www.grimsbytelegraph.co.uk/news/grimsby-news/freeport-status-humber-75m-investment-5068000>
- 12 Modelling by consultancy Vivid Economics. <https://www.vivideconomics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/A-Free-Zone-Policy-fit-for-the-UK-Main-Report.pdf>
- 13 Sebastian Payne 'Grimsby's green revolution is a model for other towns post-pandemic'. <https://www.ft.com/content/ece29089-2455-45dd-ac07-12d051dffc4b>
- 14 HM Treasury, Freeports Bidding Prospectus. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/935491/Freeports_Bidding_Prospectus_final.pdf
- 15 Chris Pissarides, Jolene Skordis, Anna Thomas, Samuel Atwell, Josh De Lyons. 'Automation, Politics and the Future of Work' IFOW 2019.
- 16 Empowering Places is a programme which aims to demonstrate the role that concentrated clusters of community businesses can play in creating better places and reducing inequality in local areas. Funded by Power to Change, the programme is delivered by Co-operatives UK in partnership with CLES and NEF.
- 17 Gilbert, Abigail and Anna Thomas. 'The Amazonian Era: How Algorithmic Systems are Eroding Good Work' IFOW 2021.



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